In Nick Allburn's latest, he concedes the fact that this year's Cavaliers have been about as frustrating to watch at times that a conference finalist can realistically be. In the same breath, when this team has had it's backs to the wall ... they have responed every time. And while LeBron James' numbers have been off in this season's playoffs, Nick has a feeling LeBron is going to rise up against the hated Pistons.

Even for a fan base starving for a winner, the ‘06-’07 Cavaliers have been, at times, as frustrating to watch as a conference finalist can realistically be. Just when they seem to turn the corner, they revert to their old ways and lay an egg like they did against the Nets last Wednesday evening. But in spite of all the trials and tribulations akin to this ball club, the Cavs have come through when it’s really counted, and they’ve earned themselves a rematch of last year’s semifinals against their old adversary, the Detroit Pistons.

There have been several recurring problems which have plagued the Cavaliers on a nearly nightly basis (and Larry Hughes‘ jump shot counts as two), but the one issue that stands out the most with the media at both the local and national levels is the play of LeBron James.

In the eyes of some, James has regressed this season. This perception was reinforced last week, when LeBron was spurned by many basketball writers, coming up a few votes short of the All-NBA First Team. Although every basketball pundit with a pulse would concede that James is certainly one of the five best players in the league, it is this perceived regression which banished him from the All-NBA First Team position he occupied last season.

Statistically, there is some, albeit marginal, support for the theory of regression within James’ game. Here are James’ numbers from his first four seasons, respectively:

20.9---5.9---5.5
27.2---7.2---7.4

31.4---6.6---7.0
27.3---6.0---6.7

(points---assists---rebounds)

Yes, LeBron's numbers did decrease from '05-'06 to '06-'07 in the three major offensive categories, but he also played almost two fewer minutes per game, which shrinks the disparities even more. From a purely statistical perspective, the difference between James' third and fourth seasons was negligible.

So why all of this commentary focusing on LeBron's "regression""? Because, let's face it Cavs fans, King James has been coasting. It's something that many of us realized early in the season, although few, if any, had the guts to initially voice such sentiments. Now in fairness, LeBron while "coasting" is better than about 98 percent of the players in the NBA, and it's not as if LeBron took every game off. He didn't. There were a number of games during which James asserted his will and demonstrated that when properly motivated, there isn't much outside of an injury, illness, or act of God which can slow him down (e.g. the March 7th 101-97 OT win over Detroit). It's also worth noting that LeBron''s "coasting," coupled with a slight decrease in minutes played, have left James less bruised and battered than he was entering the 2006 playoffs, which bodes well for the Cavaliers' chances.

These playoffs have offered a stark contrast to last year's, during which LeBron needed to deliver a herculean performance on a nightly basis simply to give the Cavs an opportunity to win. This year, LeBron has played within the system, concentrating more on setting up his teammates for quality shots than on his own scoring. LeBron's approach to the 2007 playoffs can even be described as passive.

There have been flashes, mind you, of LeBron's dominance in these playoffs, and the first and fourth quarters of Friday's decisive game six against the Nets come to mind. But primarily, LeBron has chosen to sit back, focus on his teammates, and simply win games against two opponents that the Cavaliers should have, and did in fact, defeat.

Why haven't we seen the dominant, unstoppable LeBron James of old? Aside from the fact that the Cavaliers have been winning games with LeBron in "pass first" mode, my theory is that LeBron is cleverly hoodwinking the Pistons; lulling

them to sleep, if you will. Not literally of course, but rather, analogous to how a cunning poker player loses a few bad hands early in order to bait his opponents into a trap later in the contest. Once the Pistons realize that Lebron the distributor has been replaced by LeBron the runaway train (or “The L-Train,” as Austin Carr would prefer), it could be too late for Rasheed‘s Rascals to recover.

Indulge me, and assume that I’m right; that LeBron comes out with all barrels blazing, driving to the hoop with steadfast intensity comparable to a Florida retiree driving to the early bird special. When you consider what a large proportion of the Cavs’ offense flows through LeBron, the Pistons are going to be dealing with a vastly different Cavaliers team than they scouted during rounds one and two.

And with any luck, that element of surprise will provide the Cavs with the edge they need to shock the world, and earn the franchise’s first NBA Finals berth.